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**Recycling High Culture in Science Fiction:  
Homer and Shakespeare in Dan Simmons's *Ilium* and  
*Olympos***

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# **Recycling High Culture in Science Fiction: Homer and Shakespeare in Dan Simmon's *Ilium and Olympos***

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*"Human art, Mahnmüt knew, simply transcended  
human understanding."  
-Iium*

# Since Hugo Gernsback first coined the term "scientifiction" back in the 1926, the genre of Science Fiction has suffered many changes and transformations. From the very beginning, it was regarded as a lowly form of literature, despite the attempt of the nascent pulps (Gernsback's own *Amazing Stories*) to accurately define every scientific aspect of their stories. Seen as a literature for the masses, the genre evolved only to see itself shaped by different historical events (Second World War, Post-War period, etc...), events that defined pretty much the content of the contemporary narrative, as the almost prophetic/didactic stories on war conflicts published in pulps such as *Astounding Science Fiction* show.

Nowadays, Science Fiction has derived into so many different strands that it is not possible to define it as an only, unitary genre. Still, this somehow instructive spirit lingers in today's Science Fiction, to the extent that whole narratives are sometimes based on works of what is regarded high-art, such as Shakespeare's plays, Romantic poetry or even classic epic poems. In *Ilium* and *Olympos*, Dan Simmons goes beyond and brings together classic works as diverse Homer's *Iliad* or *The Tempest*, among others – adapting, reshaping and recasting them to his own interests– to create a SF work of epic proportions, in both length and scope.

An author “renowned for his in-depth research” (Schindler 2000: website), Simmons has admitted that “it’s never a goal of mine [his] to drag in information for information’s sake” (in Schindler 2000: website). Although not openly didactic in purpose, Simmons manages to create a world deeply rooted in the classics and solid enough to be read on its own; no previous knowledge of the classics is required by the reader. Since no two readers will share the same cultural background, the impressions, thoughts and experiences derived from their reading will radically differ depending on their knowledge of the classics and the other sources the text is based on. In Simmons’s words, when reading *Ilium*, “the reader is on his or her own.” (in Silver 2003: website)

In this paper I would like to analyse how the different kind of readers may react to this so called high-culture, as adapted to the Earth envisioned by Dan Simmons some thousand years into our future. To do so I will first consider the point of view of the illustrated readers, those with previous knowledge of the classics that Simmons deals with. In the second part I will focus my study on the less demanding readers, those with little or no knowledge of the many sources the novel is built upon. In addition, I will comment on the points that arise when a work as deeply rooted in the classics as this is subject to such different points of view.

Before actually getting into the discussion, however, it is important that we consider the context of the novels. This way, we can understand to what extent the narration depends on its external sources.

In *Ilium* (2004), Simmons introduces three apparently unrelated storylines whose relationship will only make itself clear as the events unfold. The first of the storylines narrates the story of Thomas Hockenberry, a scholar of the *Iliad* from our age that has been resurrected by the Greek gods (now residing on the Martian Olympus Mons) to

monitor the events of the Trojan war. Now a 'scholic', his task is to watch over the conflict and report to the gods whatever discrepancies he can find between the war taking place on the plains of this other Ilium and the epic poem by Homer. The second storyline transports us to a future Earth whose Eloi-like inhabitants have forgotten all history and whose only purpose in life is literally having fun. Their needs tended by seemingly harmless robotic servitors, they live under the assumption that when their allotted span of a hundred years (or five-twenties, as they refer to it) comes to an end, they will be called to the rings visible up in the sky to join the post-humans (a self-evolved strand of humanity) in their orbital cities. The third storyline narrates the mission to Mars of Orphu and Mahnmut, two 'moravecs' or fully autonomous robots that descend from the AIs sent to explore the outer limits of the Solar system centuries ago. During their journey to Olympus Mons, they will spend most of their time discussing Shakespeare and Proust in an attempt to shed some light to what means to be human.

Along the novel, Harman and Daeman (two of the last humans on Earth) will travel to the orbital rings and discover that their whole existence is based on a lie and that the post-humans no longer exist. With the help of Prospero, the avatar of the planet's logosphere and thus a provider of information, they will destroy the 'firmary', the place that enables their life style, while trying to survive the attacks of Caliban, its sinister guardian. Orphu and Mahnmut will eventually complete their mission (after facing the most extreme difficulties), thus enabling possible Hockenberry's plan that will eventually send Trojans and Achaeans to war against the gods themselves.

*Olympos* narrates the events after the turning points that are the destruction of the 'firmary' and the war against the gods. Now powerless and defenceless, the last humans on Earth must struggle to survive in a world that does not allow their lifestyle

anymore. Without servitors to tend all their needs, they have to relearn technology and, most importantly, the art of warfare, for their lives are in constant danger due to the attacks of their former robot-protectors: the voynix. At the same time, Harman embarks on a quest to recover the lost knowledge and history of humanity with the help of Prospero.

In the meantime, Trojans and Achaeans lay siege to Olympus Mons with the aid of a 'moravec' army. Thanks to moravec technology, men can face the gods in equal conditions in a war that does not seem to have an end. The end comes, however, when the moravec army eventually retires and the siege is brought to an end. Without a common enemy, Trojans and Achaeans resume their war, this time with the help of the gods, who actively participate by supporting their own side. Eventually, the gods turn to their own affairs and start a war of their own against the Titans, who have been freed by Achilles.

In the end, the city of Ilium is teleported to safety to the original Earth, where the last of the humans have been previously rescued by the moravecs. Hence, they start a new civilization with Harman's rescued knowledge as a basis.

In analysing Simmons's complex two novel, it is my aim to prove that the several layers of meaning and complexity that the text is composed of are born not only in the bringing together of high and low culture, but rather in the new approach science fiction (and specially Dan Simmons) brings to the still on-going debate of high vs. low culture. Historically, such debate was dominated by the postmodernist top-down approach, that is, the consideration of low culture always in regard to high culture (Hollinger 2002). With *Ilium* and *Olympos* Simmons creates a new perspective by considering high

culture (literary texts) in regards to ‘low’ culture (science fiction), placing the later first and foremost.

## THE ILLUSTRATED READER

As we have seen, *Ilium* and *Olympos* rely heavily on classic works, being the *Iliad* and *The Tempest* the most prominent (but not the only) ones<sup>1</sup>. To those readers who are already familiar with such works, however, the most interesting parts may be those in which the author deviates from the original, rather than those in which the classics are faithfully recreated. This part of the paper will deal, precisely, with those aspects of Simmons’s personal reinterpretation of the classic works that derive from the original and thus may attract the attention of the illustrated readers.

### *The problem of how*

The very first aspect to take into account, and one that initially may not strike the reader as obvious, is the one that allows the very foundations of the novel to work: how can a writer combine works so distant in time and origin? The answer is to be found in what Darko Suvin believes to be a core concept to understand any work of science fiction: the *novum* or the question of ‘what if?’ (Suvin 1979), a “thought experiment [...] crucial to all sf.” (Mendlesohn 2003: 4) The ‘what if?’ around which *Ilium* and *Olympos* are built is apparently a simple one, but the thought experiment necessary to answer it requires a tremendous effort of speculation: ‘what if the imagination of powerful minds could create completely new universes<sup>2</sup>?’ and ‘what if the gate to these universes could be opened?’

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<sup>1</sup> *The Odyssey*, *The Time Machine* by H.G Wells, *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust, and the poem *Caliban Upon Setebos* by Robert Browning also play important roles in the shaping of the novel.

<sup>2</sup> Simmons’s treatment of reality in *Ilium* is not exactly new. In the short story “Vani Fucci is Alive and Well and Living in Hell” (also by Simmons) the main character explains that reality is literally moulded

With these questions as a premise, Simmons brings to his fiction the characters of Prospero, Caliban and Miranda and almost the whole cast of the Iliad and many of the characters of the Epic Cycle. In some cases, as happens with Trojans and Achaeans, the ‘abduction’ is almost literal, for large parts of the plot revolve around a siege of Troy in which almost no character remains unnamed. In a slightly different (but still powerful) way, Simmons writes his own *The Tempest* by means of defining (Caliban’s nature is neither blurred nor ambiguous: he is a beast), redefining (Miranda is no longer Prospero’s daughter) and even reversing roles (a topic that will be dealt with later in this section).

However complex these questions may seem, we must remember that they are not new in themselves. The questions Simmons proposes are just the fictional realization of a phenomenon that is constantly taking place in literature: *borrowing*. While authors tend to borrow poems, plots, lines or characters and adapt them to their work, Simmons is able to come up with an elaborate idea to tell the reader that he is actually and literally *borrowing* from those works, that is, from “those worlds and universes earlier imagined by the force of human genius.”(*Olympos* 546) Nevertheless, it is precisely this process, the answering of this ‘what if?’ that enables Simmons to address several controversial aspects of the classics in ways unexpected.

### ***The Tempest***

Prospero, Caliban and Miranda are the most notably transformed characters in the novel. While their presence in the text is still linked to their original source, they have been adapted to the advanced technological world they inhabit. As an example, Prospero has been turned into the avatar of the Earth’s logosphere, a self-aware “planet-

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by its collective perception, and that our conception of contemporary hell is a consequence of Dante Alighieri’s epic poem the *Divine Comedy*.



wide datasphere” (*Ilium* 432). As a result, he works as a provider of information; his actions are never direct. In turn, Caliban’s nature is now fully fleshed. Although originally he belongs to *The Tempest*, Simmons decides here to portray the character as a monster and a beast by borrowing Robert Browning’s character from *Caliban Upon Setebos*. Unlike in the original play, Caliban is without a doubt a villain, for his nature is now clearly defined. In a similar way, Miranda undergoes a radical change: she is no longer Prospero’s daughter. Although the familiar link has been erased, the two characters are still connected, for Miranda is now a post-human, the self-evolved strand of humanity whom Prospero himself helped to create.

It is in this context of change that Simmons introduces what is perhaps the major deviation from the original play: the rape of Miranda. Whether Caliban tried to abuse Prospero’s daughter or not in *The Tempest* is out of question, which is also the case in the novel. As Prospero explains to Miranda in a scene reminiscent of the original play, “had the world bent to Caliban’s will and member, he would have long since peopled this island earth with little Calibans by you.”(*Olympos* 501). Caliban being now an outright villain, the act in itself loses much of the significance it had in *The Tempest*, where Caliban’s dual nature is rather obscure and ambiguous.

However, Simmons gives this a completely new meaning when the rape becomes a necessary act for Harman, one of the main characters, to progress in his quest for knowledge. During his journey with Prospero, Harman learns that, if he is to regain humanity’s lost history, he has to awaken Miranda, the last of the post-humans... by raping her. Due to Harman’s origin, the word rape, as well as its meaning and implications, holds a completely different significance than it does for Prospero and Caliban in the play: “As with the absence of the concept of sin in Harman’s world, so was there little incidence or thought of the idea of rape.”(*Olympos* 484) Nevertheless,

Harman is aware of “the unpleasantness of what he was about to do” (*Olympos* 483) which makes him feel “every inch the violator” (*Olympos* 486). Hence, what for Caliban is meant to be an act of transgression, unwanted and undesired by both Prospero and Miranda, is now turned into an act of sacrifice, a necessary but reluctantly accepted step in Harman’s quest for knowledge. While in *The Tempest* the mere fact that the rape could have ever taken place is enough for Prospero to condemn Caliban, in the novel it is Prospero who compels Harman to do it. This way, the role of the rape is completely reversed.

### ***Ilium and the Epic Cycle – The Dilemma of Achilles***

The siege of Ilium is, perhaps, one of the most faithful fictional recreations that are found throughout the novel. While Prospero and the characters of *The Tempest* are introduced to the reader as part of the post-human legacy, the very opening of the novel instantly takes the reader to the plains of Ilium, where the Achaeans forces are laying siege to the city of Troy:

Rage. Sing, O Muse of Achilles, of Peleus’ son, murderous, man-killer, fated to die, sing of the rage that cost the Achaeans so many good men and sent so many vital, hearty souls down to the dreary House of the Death. [...] sing of the gods themselves [...] here on their new Olympos, and of the rage of the posthumans [...] and of the rage of those few true humans left, self-absorbed and useless. (Ilium 1)

In this paragraph, Simmons does two things: (1) by mirroring the beginning of the *Iliad*, Simmons sets the epic tone to which the rest of the narrative will be subjected and (2) although the reader is instantly placed in a definite place and time (the siege of Troy) he or she is also told that, whatever the similarities with the classic poem, this is *not* the *Iliad*. Indeed, Thomas Hockenberry, former classics professor and “unwilling Chorus of this tale” (*Ilium* 1) is in charge of narrating an *Iliad* that is, from the very beginning, already different than the one we know. Initially, the differences are those that derive from mere observation, such as the exact number of warriors and soldiers or the

chronological order of the actual war, while the major facts that will decide the final outcome of the war remain mostly unchanged. However, it is precisely Hockenberry's presence in Homer's tale that triggers one of the major changes, one that will change and seal the fate of many of Homer's characters.

In his resolution to stop being a pawn of the gods, the scholic comes up with a plan that will alter the course of the *Iliad* in a radical way: join Trojans and Achaeans in an alliance against the gods. To do so, Hockenberry resorts to "the fulcrum of events, the single point in the ten-year war on which everything pivoted." (*Ilium* 338) This fulcrum, as almost the whole of the *Iliad*, falls on Achilles, or rather, Achilles's wrath. As Hockenberry very well knows, the death of Patroclus is the key factor that turns the tide of the fight by stirring Achilles's wrath. To exploit this wrath, the scholic simulates Patroclus death by momentarily stealing the identity of Athena. This way, he makes sure that Achilles bloodlust turns against the gods, and not against the Trojans. With this single action, Hockenberry seals the fate of many Trojans and Achaeans that would have otherwise lived.

As a consequence of the scholic's plan, "Paris is killed in single combat with the merciless Apollo" (*Olympos* 1) which in turn seals Achille's fate. Paris dead, Achilles is liberated from his fated death and becomes to all effects virtually invulnerable. Thus, Simmons solves Achilles's dilemma by giving him the chance of a long life and even a higher glory, since the hero ends up killing Zeus himself in this new reality.

As a conclusion to this section, it could be argued that this innovative approach is possible, precisely, thanks to the particular way Simmon has of addressing the debate of high vs. low culture. In including (and not subjecting) one literature into the other,

the roles of the characters can be adapted to the genre. Thus, even if some conservatives critics “believed that the science fatally narrowed the scope of the fiction” (Csicserey-Ronay 2005: 44) truth is that the case is exactly the opposite.

### **THE UNEXPERIENCED READER**

While the influences the novel is built upon are many, its inner mechanisms and imaginative reworking of those same influences are only appealing to the reader if he or she knows how to read them. Although readers unfamiliar with Proust, Shakespeare and Homer can still enjoy *Ilium* and *Olympos*, their presence is something that cannot be ignored. This part of the paper will deal with the reception of the classics by those readers with little to no knowledge of such works. To do so, I will focus on the characters of Harman and Daeman, two “of those few true humans left” (*Ilium* 1) and their radically opposite attitudes towards knowledge.

#### ***Daeman – The ‘practical approach’***

Average science fiction readers will find in *Ilium* all the “exploration, (...) detailed depictions of technology not yet invented and landscapes no man has ever seen” (Disch 2000: 5) that have given the name to the genre. In that regard, the classics play their role too; the exploration of Mars, the war of Troy and the godly plots in which Hockenberry sees himself concerned with take up much of the narration. For some readers, however, the use that Simmons makes of the classics does not really add to the novel, to the extent that some Amazon reviews consider the novel to be “the literary equivalent of showing off” or even “self-indulgent fantasy”. While most of the reviews are positive, the main controversial issue in which most negative reviews seem to agree is precisely that one: the utility or practicality of the classics in the text.

In a similar way, Daeman, one of the last humans on Earth and main character in the novel, also shows a sceptical attitude towards all things non-practical, that is, those actions and pieces of knowledge that do not have a direct and immediate application. In that sense, Daeman is the perfect example of the community introduced by Simmons: as the rest of his species, he enjoys only the present and thus, only cares about things that can affect it. This is made clear in a scene in which Daeman visits a library with the rest of the characters. To his eyes, books are “useless artifacts” that “smelled of old age and decay”; they offer no knowledge “pertinence to our lives today” (*Ilium* 39). This, however, Daeman has no way of knowing, for none of the last humans except Harman know how to read. It could be argued, then, that Daeman’s prejudices against books are rooted in his inability to understand what they can offer. Since he has no immediate way of acquiring something relevant from them, rejection ensues.

Differences aside, it could be established, then, a parallelism between the character’s attitude and those readers who reject Simmons’s novels on the grounds of the practicality of the classics in relation to the text. Such rejection, however, will in all likelihood be rooted in the lack of a wider background in relation to the classics that would allow for a better understanding.

### ***Harman – The ‘find out’ approach***

While it is true that *Ilium* “is a work of such brain-boggling scope” (Wagner 2003: website) that may take aback some of the potential readers, actually this same complexity in the use of the classics may also attract those readers who, despite the difficulties, are interested in ‘finding out’ what lies behind. Unlike the previous kind of readers, those who “enjoy burrowing into a books depth” (Wagner 2003: website) will

find in *Ilium* both a challenging and a rewarding experience. In the same way, the novel can also work for them as a bridge towards the classics.

This kind of eager, willing reader finds his parallel in Harman, the curious Eloi who taught himself to read in order to unearth the secrets of the post-humans. Unable to accept things as they are, he feels the urge to look forward and deeper, to find the hidden meanings his hollow society cannot provide him with. Like the interested reader, Harman is curious about things he does not know, even if he does not understand them. In a very revealing scene in which Harman is taught how to use *allnet* (as its name indicates, it shows its user all the connections between literally all things, whether they be biochemical processes or energy waves) he is able to see “everything... heard everything” but in turn “understood nothing” (*Ilium* 432). In the same way, the reader interested in ‘finding out’ will keep pushing forward, even if he is not able to fully understand what he is reading.

Hence, it could be said that the meaning of the novel is created by its reader. While this kind of reader may not be able to make sense of all the aspects the classics present, his insistence in going beyond will provide him with a fuller, more rewarding experience than it would if he did not try delve deeper.

### **THE TURIN DRAMA: A POSTMODERN READING**

After this analysis of the novels and their variable reception, it should be clear by now that *Ilium* and *Olympos* are by no means simple works. In fact, their complexity relies not only in the ways the author taps into the classics, but rather in the many interpretations and reactions by readers and characters that have been analysed. This multiplicity of layers, this intricate system in which high culture is fused with the ‘low’

genre of science fiction is, precisely, one of the main concerns so characteristic of the postmodern discourse (Hollinger 2005: 240).

Until recently this “weakening of the boundaries” was dominated by “the frequent incorporation (...) of SF images and ideas into ‘literary’ texts written *in the mode of science fiction*”(Hollinger 240, original emphasis). This approach conditions the relationship between ‘high’ and ‘low’ by being only one-directional: the established literary texts turn to the low genre for images and ideas. In a similar way, intertextuality is also one of the key features of all SF texts, although such intertextuality has historically been self-referential, as Adam Roberts states (2000: 70).

With *Ilium*, Simmons brings a new perspective into the debate by not only reversing the flow of thoughts and images (that is, from ‘high’ to ‘low’) but also by completely eradicating the dominating hierarchies. While one of the characteristics of previous postmodern works was the inclusion of “books within books” (Buttler 2003: 137) -which in a way suggests the idea of one narration dominating the other, or one fiction depending on another- Simmons portrays the different narrations as actual independent *realities*, each one inhabiting their own universe. In doing this, no narration is inherently superior to the other, but rather parallel: all of them exist individually.

However, boundaries still exist; that no narrative universe dominates the other also means that they are separated, independent and individual. To solve this problem, Simmons introduces the Turin cloth, a device that allows the Eloi-like inhabitants of Earth to witness the siege of Troy. As presented in the novel, the Turin cloth brings the *Iliad* to a whole new level; it can now be seen, heard and felt as if one were literally part of the action. In short, it is the dream of every scholar, Professor of classics or simply very interested reader. However, this for us new level of experience is for the Eloi a necessary one, for in being illiterate (or post-literate, as the novel puts it) they have no

other way of experiencing narrative. Although the Turin cloth does not allow interaction per se, it allows information to flow.

Nevertheless, for all its closeness to the action, the Turin cloth only offers a vicarious experience. As post-literate users, the Eloi are the perfect embodiment of the postmodernist culture as Fredric Jameson defines it: “postmodernist culture can be identified by, among other things, its attention to surface style (...), its lack of emotional affect, and its loss of any sense of historical continuity.”(Jameson, 1991, cited in Hollinger 2005: 239). Their simplistic perception of their world, however, is not incidental, for it is the only one they can get. In lacking any kind of cultural background or common history, the Eloi can only revel in its *surface*, for there is no further depth to be explored; “they lived in a world tilted towards the immediate future, the next instant of gratification”(Luckhurst 2005: 198). Hence, the Eloi perceive the Turin drama as a kind of soap opera, a source of amusement, and as a result they start to raise “temples to Athena, Zeus, Ares... all the gods in the Turin tale.”(*Ilium* 85) Such practice, nevertheless, is no less vicarious, for it is only a form of imitation and holds no religious meaning whatsoever.

Taking all of this into account, it could be argued that the Turin drama is the perfect exemplification of the blending of high and low culture. Although in the novel this blending is apparently innocuous, it seems to confirm one of Jameson’s predictions that

“the perceived waning of the once sacrosanct distinctions between ‘high’ (literary, modernist) culture and the products of ‘low’ (popular, generic) culture, including such frequently denigrated forms as science fiction (...) is not a positive development, leading as it does (...) to the devaluation and commodification of our most sacred (high) cultural icons.” (Jameson 1991, cited in Hollinger 2005: 240)

However –and this is a very important ‘however’– while it is true that the *Iliad* is devalued by the Eloi’s perception, such devaluation is not to be found in the



disappearance of boundaries, but rather in their inability to understand what they are seeing. As a people who lack history, culture and even art, they are unable to perceive the Turin drama as anything but pure entertainment.

In a way, it could also be argued that the Eloi are as post-modern as one can get, for they are truly a “copy that has no original; the model has replaced the actual” (Buttler 2003: 144). While this can be read as a beautiful metaphor, in *Ilium* a copy literally means a copy: every time any of the Eloi makes use of their only known way of long-distance transportation “the faxnode pavilions actually turn our bodies into coded energy and then our bodies, minds and memories are *rebuilt* at another node.” (Olympos 504, emphasis mine). Although they retain mind and memory, every time they travel, their bodies are destroyed and then rebuilt, so that the copy becomes also the original of the next copy. This way, they live in a world of constant change, “a blur –a smear of laughter and sex blending into all the other parties near all the other faxnodes” (*Ilium* 351) where boundaries are all but defined.

However, things change radically when Harman comes back from his quest for knowledge and brings back humanity’s lost legacy. After risking his life several times, he is able to transmit the lost memory of his race (art, culture, history –everything) to the rest of the Eloi. Ironically enough, this same legacy also brings back the ability to teleport freely to any place on Earth, eliminating this way all boundaries. Nevertheless, since they now share a common history, they can also hold to a sense of identity, a purpose beyond survival. Thus, now that they know who they are, they can go freely wherever they choose without the risk of losing themselves in the process. As a direct consequence, their perception of culture also changes and therefore they are now able to interact with the *Iliad* (as much as any form of high culture) in receptive attitude. This is made clear at the very end of the novel when Orphu, a moravec and one of the main

characters, starts reciting Homer's original epic poem to an audience eager to hear. In the same way, the reader's perception of the poem has been also inevitably changed, for after having read the novel, his or her background has also changed.

## **CLOSING THOUGHTS**

As a conclusion, it could be said that the main problem in the disintegration of the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture (low being now but just another denomination) is not the devaluation of literature itself, but rather the perception we have of it. As we have seen, high culture can only be so if it is considered as such, otherwise it becomes a model to imitate, a surface without depth. While it is true that in combining high culture and sf the so called 'high' literature loses part of its exclusive meaning, it is also true that the scope of readers it can reach is also widened. In addition, the inclusion of 'high' culture in the science fiction genre enables authors, in this case Dan Simmons, to address such works in new and unexpected ways. This way, the works dealt with are more likely to find new meanings and interpretations. Although no two readers will react in the same way to a novel like *Ilium* or *Olympos*, those readers interested in it will find their way towards the classics. In the same way, those who are not inclined to the classics will still be able to enjoy a sf novel of epic proportions.

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